

Time to Solve the Iranian Nuclear Puzzle

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In the 10 years since the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) first confirmed that Iran had secretly built a uranium-enrichment plant, Tehran has expanded its enrichment program and other sensitive nuclear fuel-cycle activities.

Iran's leaders apparently have not made a strategic decision to build nuclear weapons, and they do not yet have the necessary ingredients for building a nuclear arsenal. Iran's new foreign minister recently reiterated that "nuclear weapons have no place in our national security doctrine and are even detrimental to our national security."

Unfortunately, the five rounds of nuclear talks since April 2012 between Iran and the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) revealed substantial differences and an inability by both sides to take the necessary first steps. At the same time, Iran's capabilities to produce material for nuclear weapons have improved even as international sanctions on Iran have been tightened.

There is still time to use diplomacy to secure a meaningful, win-win deal to guard against a nuclear-armed Iran. With the Aug. 3 inauguration of Iran's new president, former nuclear negotiator Hassan Rouhani, there is a new and crucial opportunity to achieve a breakthrough.

Leaders in Washington and Tehran say they want a diplomatic solution. In an Aug. 4 statement, the White House said that should Iran's new government "choose to engage substantively and seriously to meet its international obligations and find a peaceful solution to this issue, it will find a willing partner in the United States." In August, a group of 76 senators wrote to President Barack Obama urging him "to fully explore the diplomatic process" with a "renewed sense of urgency."

Rouhani told reporters Aug. 6 that "Iran has a serious political will to solve the nuclear problem while protecting the rights of the Iranian people at the same time as it seeks to remove concerns of the other party."

The task now is to translate words into action. That requires an early renewal of talks, in which each side is prepared to table new, realistic proposals and adjust its positions to achieve a wide-ranging deal to resolve the nuclear issue.

Obama and his P5+1 partners must be prepared to expand their modest diplomatic proposal from last April in a way that sets new constraints on Iran's evolving nuclear program in exchange for significant sanctions relief.

As part of this "more-for-more" approach, the first priority of the P5+1 must be to seek a halt to Iran's accumulation of 20 percent-enriched uranium, which is above the fuel grade used in civilian power reactors and closer to weapons grade, in exchange for an arrangement to supply fuel assemblies for the Tehran Research Reactor, medical isotopes, or both. This could serve as a basis for a broader deal to limit the size and scope of Iran's enrichment program.

The P5+1 also should call on Iran halt work on its Arak heavy-water reactor, which could provide it with a second path to producing material for nuclear weapons, in exchange for other forms of civil

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Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

nuclear cooperation or energy assistance that do not represent such a high proliferation risk.

To get to “yes,” the P5+1 must be prepared to phase out hard-hitting sanctions against Iran’s banking sector and oil exports. Members of the U.S. Congress must refrain from undermining the prospects of a diplomatic solution they say they want by pressing forward with a new round sanctions before the results of the next round of talks are clear. Likewise, potential military action by nuclear-armed Israel against Iran’s nuclear sites would be counterproductive. It could set back Iran’s program for no more than two to three years, but would provoke a wider war and almost certainly lead Tehran to withdraw from the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and openly pursue nuclear weapons.

The P5+1 also must be prepared to recognize Iran’s right to pursue nuclear fuel-cycle activities, such as enrichment, under certain conditions. In March 1, 2011, congressional testimony, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said this requires that Iran respond to the international community’s concerns and irreversibly shut down any nuclear weapons program.

For his part, Rouhani must follow through on his pledge for “greater transparency” by cooperating with the IAEA investigation of suspected weapons-related experiments. Furthermore, Tehran should join the vast majority of other NPT states in providing more-timely information to the IAEA under the standards of IAEA Code 3.1 and allowing more-extensive inspections through an additional protocol to its safeguards agreement.

Even as the crises in Syria and other areas of the Middle East worsen, Obama must seize the opportunity presented by Iran’s new president by reinvigorating diplomatic efforts to finally secure a nuclear agreement on the basis of achievable goals. It will not be easy, but it is the best option on the table.

Source URL: https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2013_09/Focus